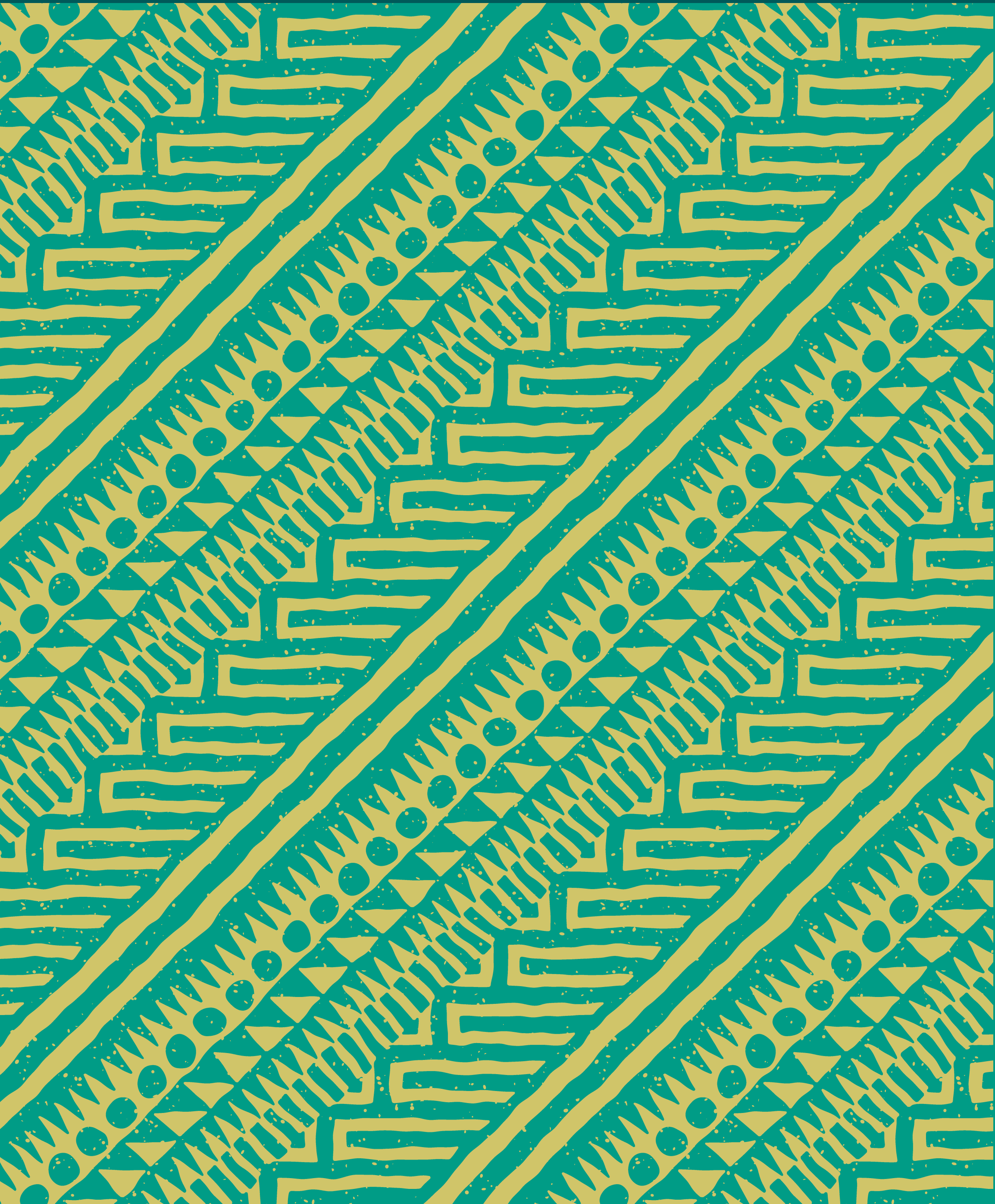
Two Aztec Wood Idols

Iconographic and Chronologic Analysis

H. B. Nicholson and Rainer Berger



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BY

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TWO AZTEC WOOD IDOLS: ICONOGRAPHIC AND CHRONOLOGIC ANALYSIS

Introduction

The art of woodcarving was highly developed in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, but, because of generally poor preservation conditions throughout most of the area, few examples of wood sculpture have survived. The most famous are the superbly carved sapote lintels at Tikal (Coe, Shook, and Satterthwaite 1961). A few other lintels, posts, beams, etc., some of them carved, are known from various Mesoamerican sites. However, the majority of extant Pre-Hispanic wood objects are relatively small, portable items: drums, spearthrowers, masks, shields, helmets, knife handles, batons, ear plugs, labrets, rattles, mirror frames, war clubs, etc. Although it is certain that at Contact thousands of wood idols were in active use as cult objects throughout Mesoamerica and it is probable that the carving of sacred images of wood goes back to Pre-Classic times, only a handful have survived. A unique, spectacular Mayoid piece was recently discovered, apparently in the Lower Usumacinta region, and was radiocarbon-dated at 537±120 A.D. (Ekholm 1964). The use of idols in general was particularly characteristic of Central Mexico in late Pre-Hispanic times, and it is known from various chroniclers' descriptions (e.g., Motolinia 1903: 32-4; 86-9) that many of these were of wood and that great numbers were systematically destroyed by the Spanish missionaries. Normal decomposition processes must have disposed of nearly all of the remainder.

In the two standard accounts of Pre-Hispanic Mexican woodcarving (Saville 1925; Noguera 1958) only one idol of wood certainly from Central Mexico[1] is included in the discussion and illustrated, a very late style female figure now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Fig. 1). It has been variously reported as from a mound at Coatepec Harinas, in the southern Basin of Toluca (Saville 1925: 83), or, preserved as an object of adoration in the nineteenth century, from the "región de los Cohuiscos," which would seem to place its provenience a little to the south, in northern Guerrero (Madrid, Expo-

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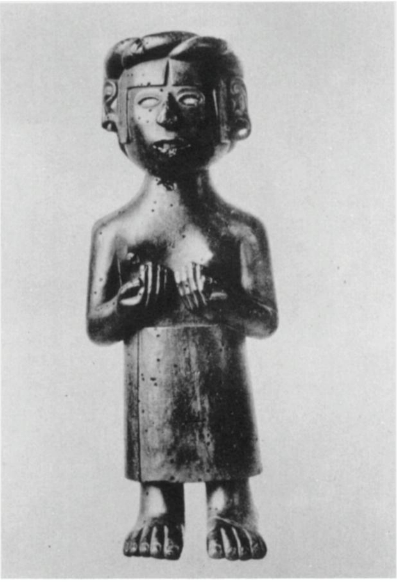
[1] Ramírez (1961) [1855-6]:36) mentioned the finding of two wood idols (along with a water goddess of Mexican onyx *tecali*) in 1852 while cleaning the "antiguo canal del Campo Florida" in the City of Mexico —but the fate of these two otherwise undescribed pieces is unknown.

Fig. 1 Wood idol of female deity. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. After Saville.



sición Histórico-Americana 1892-93, I: 18, 141).[2] The well-known "Xolotl" wood image in the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde (Saville 1922: 82, Pl. 37; Nowotny 1949; 1960: 62-8, Pls. 17-21) might have hailed originally from Central Mexico, but a Gulf Coast or even Oaxacan provenience may be more likely. The only significant wood idol from Central Mexico published (Nowotny 1961) since the one in the Museo Nacional de Antropología is a seated Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli figure, which passed into the possession of what is now the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde along with the rest of the Becker collection in 1897. Its original owner stated that it had been found in a cave at "Santita Infantita," near Tehuacan, Puebla (Infanta, north of Tehuacan?). The style fits this provenience attribution,[3] as does the deity represented, for it seems clear that this region was one of the focal points for the cult of Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli (cf. Codex Borgia 1904-09, I: 135).

Two more Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican wood idols were recently added to this tiny repertoire. They were reportedly found together over five years ago during construction activities in an area close to what had been the eastern shore of the great salt lake of the Basin of Mexico, not far west of the modern community of Texcoco. They were apparently preserved by being saturated with saline water in a swampy sub-surface deposit. Both reached the United States through commercial channels, and both are now in private collections in this country. Due to the courtesy of their owners, we have had the opportunity to examine both and to take samples for radiocarbon dating. The male figure has been published (Easby 1966: 40-1); the female figure has not been previously reproduced. Each will be described and analyzed in turn; following this, some matters which concern both will be discussed.

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[2] Perhaps these differing provenience assignments were the result of confusion between Coatepec Harinas, Mexico, and Coatepec de Costales, Guerrero; the latter was aboriginally a Chontal community but immediately adjacent to the Cohuixcatlalpan to the east.

[3] See Nicholson 1955b for some notes on the archaeology of this area.

The Female Idol

Description

This figure, 53 cm. high, represents a woman holding over her midsection a large disk, 21 cm. in diameter, with a wide raised rim (Figs. 2, 3). The interior of the disk contains a large oblong slot about 10 cm. long, 3.5 cm. wide, and 3.5 cm. deep; inside there is caked mud and a large fragment of what may have been some adhesive, another fragment of which adheres to the left portion of the inner surface of the disk. The suspected adhesive was chemically analyzed and appears to consist of a tree resin. On the upper portion of the rim is a somewhat roughened surface which may be a fabric impression. The possible function of this rimmed disk will be discussed below.

The figure wears a skirt, *cueitl*, but apparently no upper garment (*huipilli* or *quechquemitl*; cf. Figs. 1, 5). The front of the skirt displays a considerable amount of blue paint on an undercoat of white gesso, and there are small, fugitive patches of blue pigment on the upper torso and possibly elsewhere, as well as a considerable amount of gesso from which the blue has worn off on the rear of the skirt. This blue pigment may be powdered turquoise or a similar copper-containing mineral which acts also as a preservative. A shallow

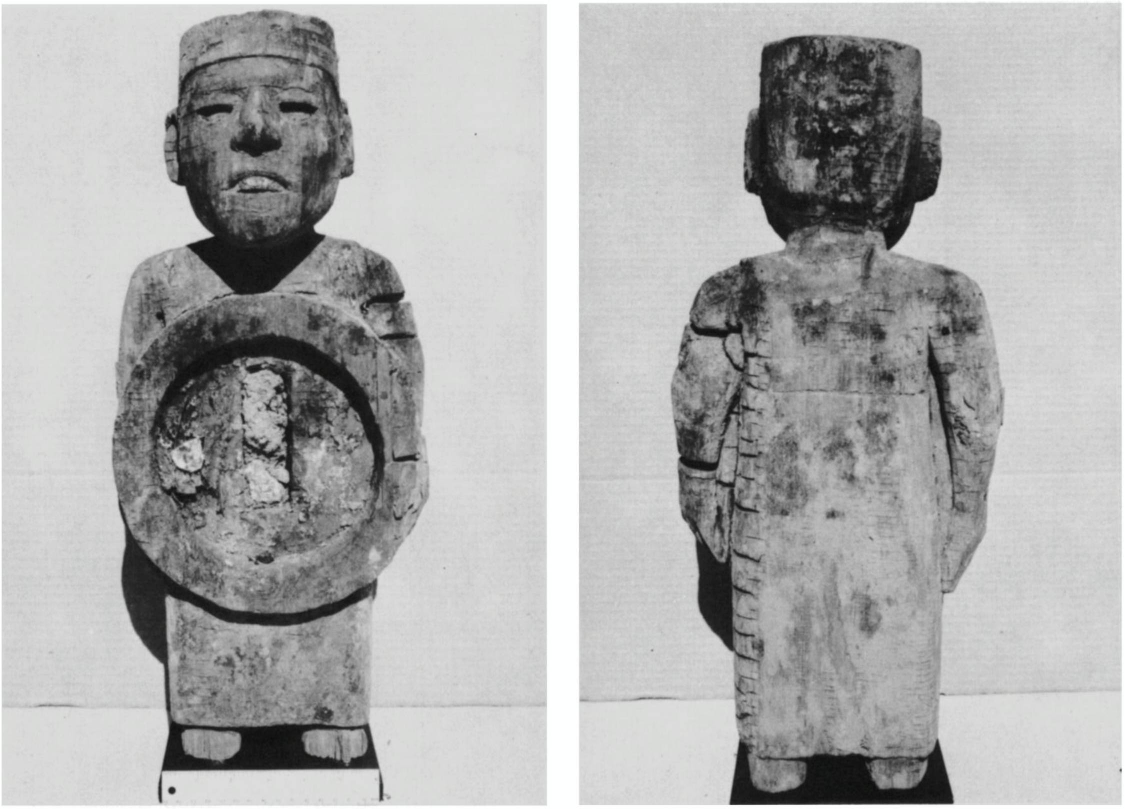

Fig. 2 Wood idol of water goddess (Chalchiuhtlicue): a) front, b) back. Courtesy City Art Museum of Saint Louis.

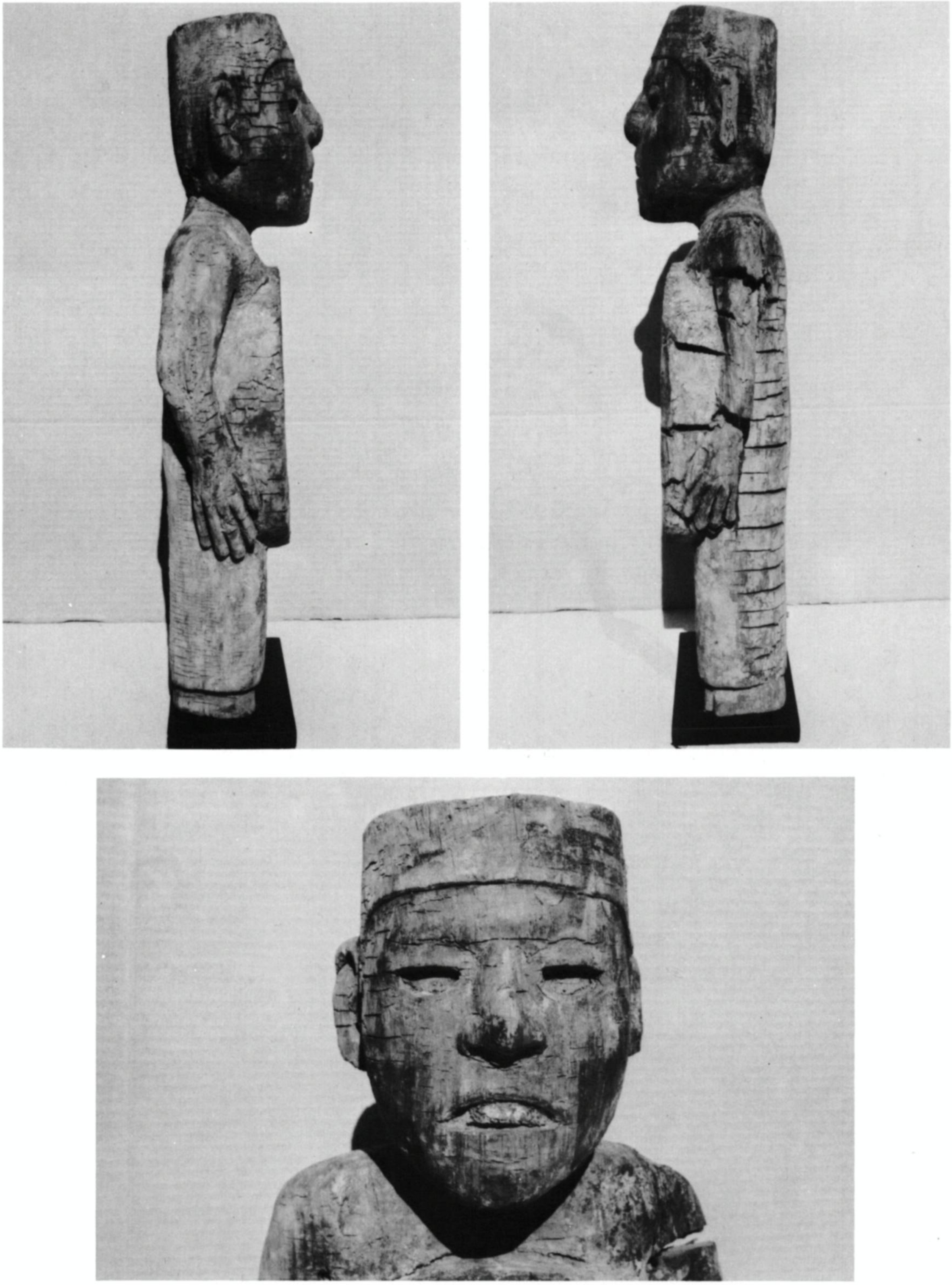

Fig. 3 Wood idol of water goddess (Chalchiuhtlicue): a) right side, b) left side, c) close-up of head. Courtesy City Art Museum of Saint Louis.

horizontal cut on the back between the armpits and the elbows may delineate the top of the skirt, although it seems rather high up on the body. The bottom of the skirt reaches to the top of the feet, the front portions of which are missing. At each armpit is a small hole which perforates the whole torso; these may have been cut through to facilitate the attachment of ornaments.

The body in general is rather stylized, more so than is typical of late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican female idols. The head (Fig. 3c), on the other hand, was carved with care, and its size is exaggerated even more than is normal in idols of this type. The treatment is essentially standard, representing a kind of ideal model of a broad, somewhat heavy face with a slight prognathism; it closely approximates the typical facial physiognomy of Central Mexican Indians. The eye sockets are hollow; they certainly originally contained inlays. The mouth contains remains of what is apparently some kind of adhesive; probably the teeth were originally represented by shell inlays pressed into this adhesive (cf. Fig. 4). On the lower portion of each cheek is a fairly large rectangular area painted black. The hairline is well delineated, as are the ears, although a sizable portion of the left one has been lost. The figure wears a distinctive and iconographically quite significant headdress, consisting of three broad bands, painted blue. The lower band is edged with five circles, perhaps originally painted white; both the headbands and the circles edging the lowermost band are outlined in black. At the back of the head the three bands diverge downward and there are traces of what was undoubtedly a representation of a knot, where the bands were tied together. The top of the head is practically flat, which lends it a rather odd appearance, as if it had on it a headpiece similar to that of a hotel bellhop.

The whole figure is rather extensively darkened, giving almost the appearance of being charred in spots. This indicates that it was exposed mainly to the action of ground water or at least considerable moisture at some point, which is consistent with the reported circumstances of its discovery. There is extensive cracking of the wood, especially on the left side.

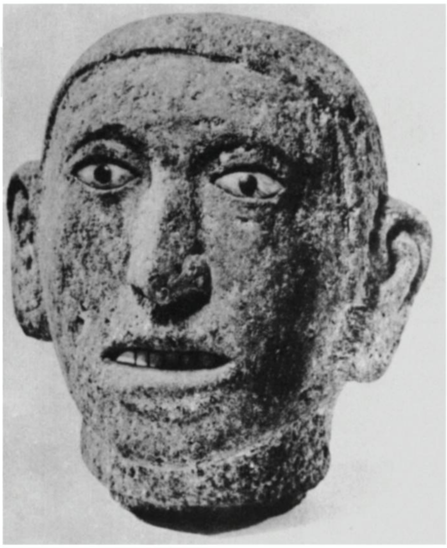

Fig. 4 Stone head with eye and mouth encrustations in place (found in 1940 in Mexico City). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. After Bernal.

Iconography

The combination of the distinctive headband, three of whose bands are painted blue, the black rectangular patches on the lower cheeks, and the blue skirt make it virtually certain that this image represents one of the most important members of the complex of fertility deities in late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico (Nicholson n.d. b), the goddess of water and life-promoting moisture in general and the elder sister of the rain gods, the Tlaloque. Her most frequently employed Nahuatl name seems to have been Chalchiuhtlicue, "Precious Greenstone (Jade, etc.)—Her—Skirt," but common alternatives were Chalchiuhcueye, "Possessor of Precious Greenstone Skirt," and Matlalcueye, "Possessor of Blue Skirt." Most Central Mexican representations of this popular goddess display versions of the same headdress worn by our figure. This consists of a kind of turban made up of superposed bands, probably of woven cotton, most commonly three to five bands, wound about the head, tied with a large knot in back, and usually edged above and below with circular elements, probably cotton balls (Figs. 5-7). In the ritual pictorials sometimes these headbands are all white or blue (rarely red), but more often they are alternatively white (or yellow) and blue (e.g., Fig. 7). Although other fertility goddesses (Chicomecoatl, Xilonen, Huixtocihuatl, Xochiquetzal, Mayahuel, *et al.*) occasionally wear this very distinctive

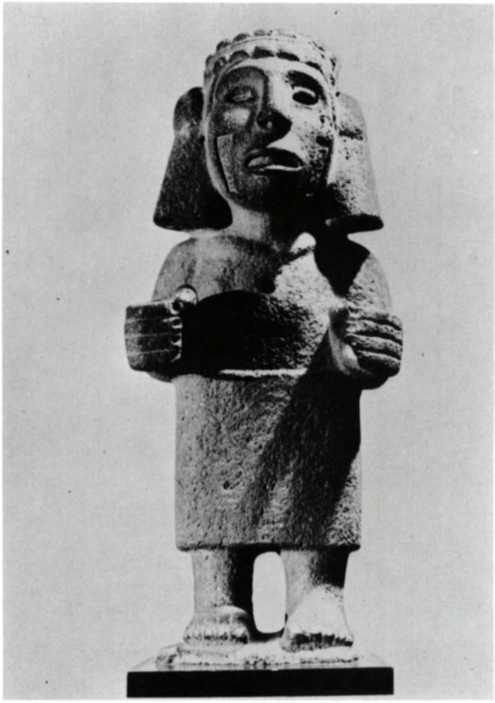

Fig. 5 (left) Stone fertility goddess idol with countersunk double cheek stripes (inlays lost). Courtesy Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.

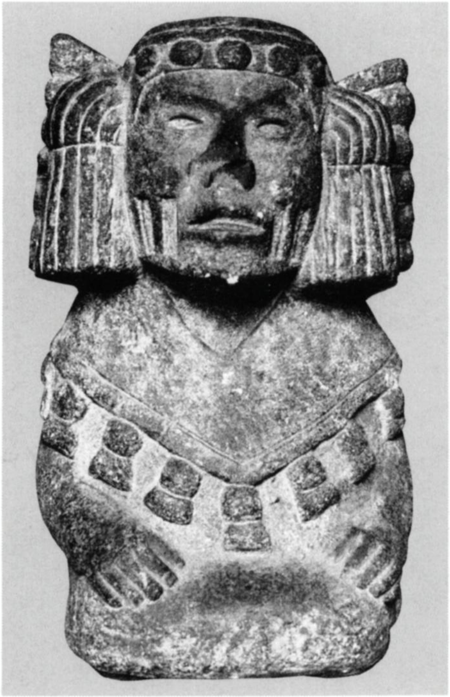

Fig. 6 (right) Stone fertility goddess idol with countersunk double cheek stripes (inlays lost). Ex-Uhde Collection.

headdress (with different colors, depending on the goddess), it is especially associated with the water goddess.[4] The color of the bands between the blue ones on our figure is dark now, but originally it is possible these bands were painted with a fugitive white which has since disappeared. Two very large tassel-like elements at either side of the head usually accompany this tiered-band headdress (e.g., Figs. 5, 6); these are lacking on our figure but might well have been added to it when it was set up and functioning as a cult image. A number of bark paper (*amatl*) ornaments, above all the pleated occipital fan, the *amacuexpalli*, were also usually part of the insignia of the water goddess and other fertility deities (e.g., Figs. 6, 7), and some of these paper ornaments were probably also originally attached to our figure.

The dark rectangular areas on the lower cheeks represent a version of one of the best diagnostic insignia of the fertility deities. Most common is either a single (Figs. 5, 7) stripe or two parallel (Fig. 6) stripes, but larger rectangular areas on the lower cheeks, as on our piece, are occasionally present instead (Figs. 8-10). This insigne occasionally decorates temple roofs, digging sticks, *octli* (pulque) pots and other vessels, ritual papers (*tetehuitl*), etc. in its double stripe form and is frequently present, in either its double or single stripe version, on representations of ordinary women. Although its original derivation (rain streaks or milpa furrows?) is obscure, its general fertility connotation seems evident.

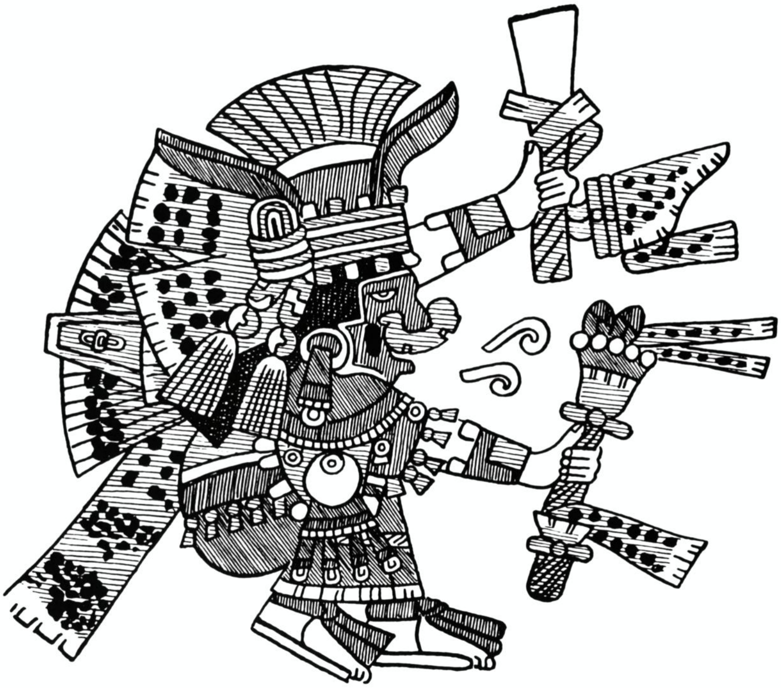

Fig. 7 Chalchiuhtlicue. Codex Borbonicus 5. *After Seler.*

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[4] On the conceptual and iconographic overlappings and blendings of the fertility deities, see Nicholson 1961, 1963.

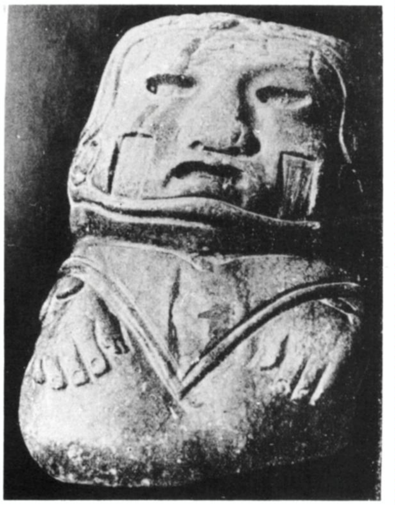
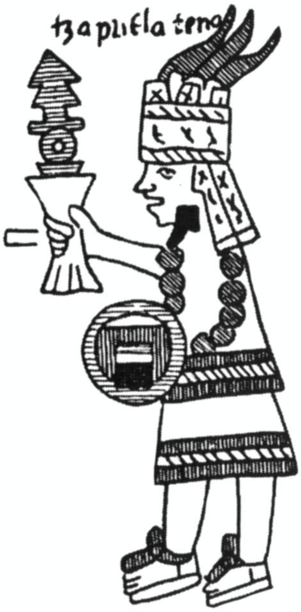


Fig. 8 Small stone idol of fertility goddess with countersunk rectangular areas on lower cheeks (inlays lost). Private collection in 1920. After Beyer.

The blue color of the skirt of our figure is a particularly strong support for the deity identification made. Although not invariably, the skirt of the water goddess in the ritual pictorials is usually colored blue (or the conceptually equivalent green, the color of jade, thus Chalchiuhtlicue, "Jade-Her-Skirt"; e.g., Fig. 7). Sometimes (e.g., Figs. 10, 26) the skirt of this goddess features blue ripple lines on a white background, but the solid color scheme is much more frequent.



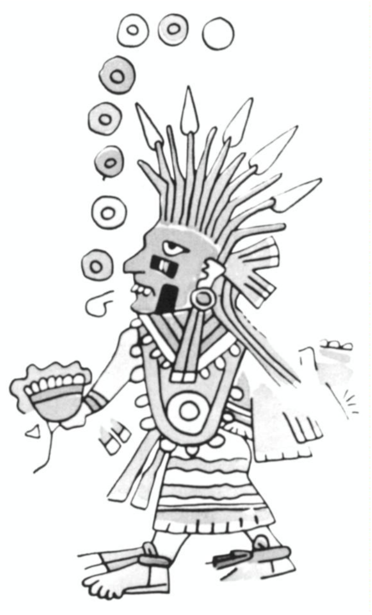


Fig. 9 (left) Zapotlantenan. Sahagún, Primeros Memoriales (Códice Matritense del Real Palacio, *fol. 254r). After Seler.*

Fig. 10 (right) Chalchiuhtlicue (combined with calendric name, 8. Malinalli). Engraving on back of stone mask. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. After Caso.

Chronologic Aspect

Recent research in radiocarbon dating has shown that careful sampling and laboratory techniques in conjunction with sophisticated, sensitive, and stable electronic counting equipment can be successfully applied to determine with acceptable accuracy the age of archaeologic wood samples which are only several hundred years old (Berger 1968; Horn 1968). Even though this work was based upon European medieval timbers, the methodology should be applicable equally well to the New World. In fact, the early work of Libby and his collaborators (1955) indicated that there is rapid and complete worldwide mixing of atmospheric carbon dioxide, which is transformed by plants during the growth process into wood.

For radiocarbon assay, wood chips were removed from the interior of that foot of the statue which, by inspection of the tree-ring pattern, was closest to the outside of the tree from which the figure was carved. Even though it was not possible to remove some of the outermost tree rings without unacceptable damage to the figure, the age difference cannot amount to more than about twenty years. The wood chips, quite possibly of Moctezuma cypress or Ahuehuete (*Taxodium mucronatum*), were then treated with dilute hydrochloric acid and further with sodium hydroxide to remove contaminants usually found under such circumstances. After radiocarbon analysis by proportional counting of carbon dioxide, an aliquot of this gas was subjected to a δC^{13} measurement not included at the time the original radiocarbon date was published as UCLA-1216 (Berger and Libby 1968a). The radiocarbon age as corrected for isotopic fractionation now stands at 575 ± 60 years which, however, does not take into account secular variations in the C^{14} content of tree rings (Suess 1965). When this refinement is taken into consideration, the actual age of the statue is sometime in the fourteenth century. A more precise date is not possible because of the character of the variation in the radiocarbon content in tree rings during this time period (Fig. 11).

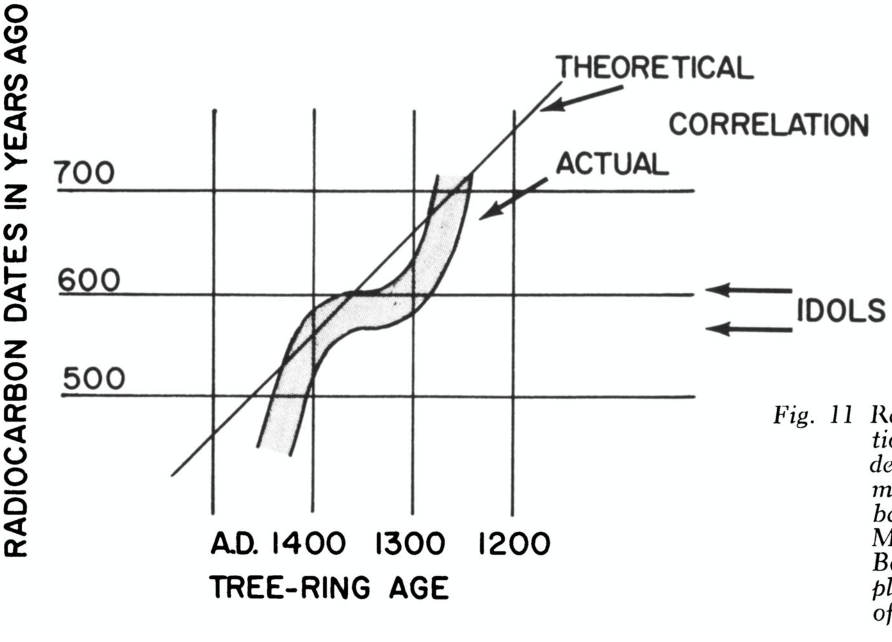


Fig. 11 *Relationship between conventional radiocarbon dates and dendrochronologically determined wood ages thought to be indicative of true age. Modified after Suess, 1965. Both* C^{14} *dates fall on a plateau lasting the duration of the fourteenth century.*

The Male Figure

Description

This figure is almost exactly the same size (54.5 cm. in height) as that just described (Figs. 12, 13). It is entirely nude, not even wearing the usual loincloth; a few late Pre-Hispanic similar nude stone sculptures are also known (e.g., Fig. 14). The figure holds over its midsection a large disk with a wide raised rim almost identical to that of the female figure. In this case, however, instead of a deep rectangular slot, the sunken interior of the disk contains a deep circular depression in its upper portion, about 9 cm. in diameter and 3 cm. deep. The hair is painted blue-green over a white gesso undercoat and is marked with parallel vertical black lines. The eyes still contain shell inlays (cf. Fig. 4); usually a dark substance (pyrites, obsidian, rubber, or chapopote) was inlaid to form the pupil. If these shell inlays are really the original ones, however, whatever substance was used to represent the pupil must have adhered to the surface of the shell and is now missing. The teeth inlays have also been lost, and almost no trace of the adhesive in the mouth remains. The ears are pierced, undoubtedly for the insertion of ear ornaments. As in the case of

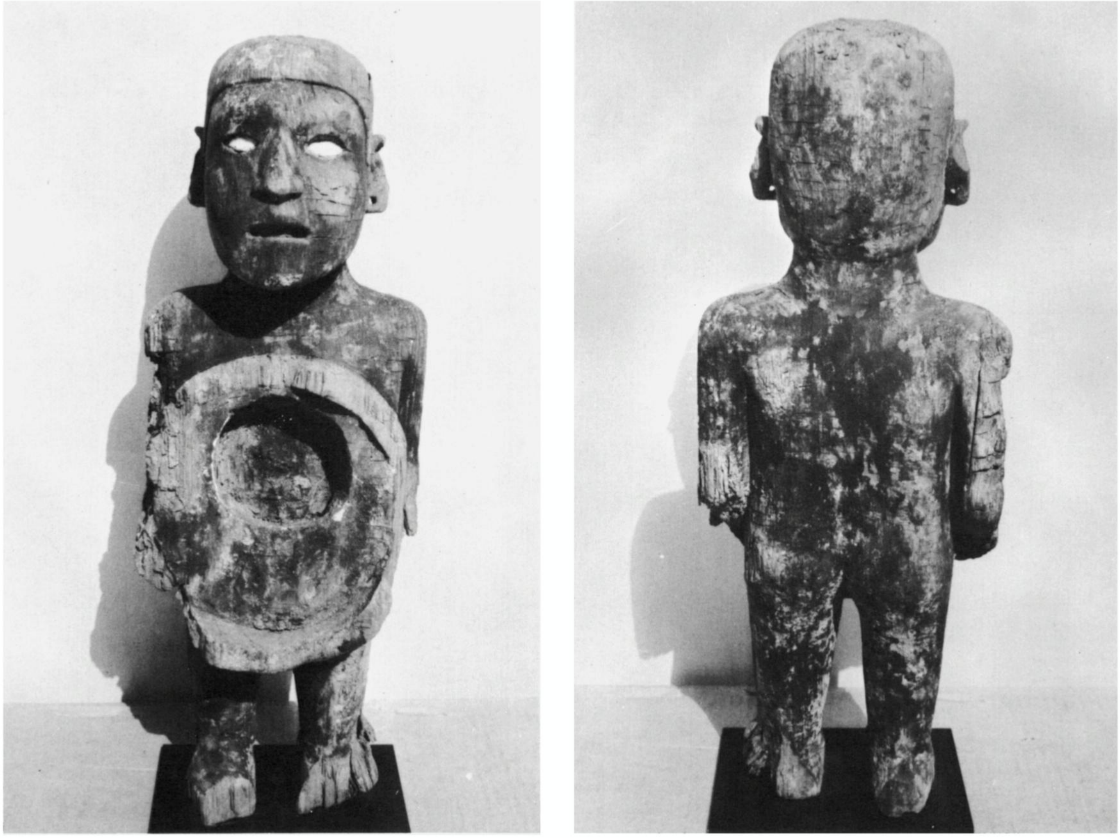


Fig. 12 Wood idol of male deity (rain god?): a) front, b) back. Courtesy Jay C. Leff Collection.

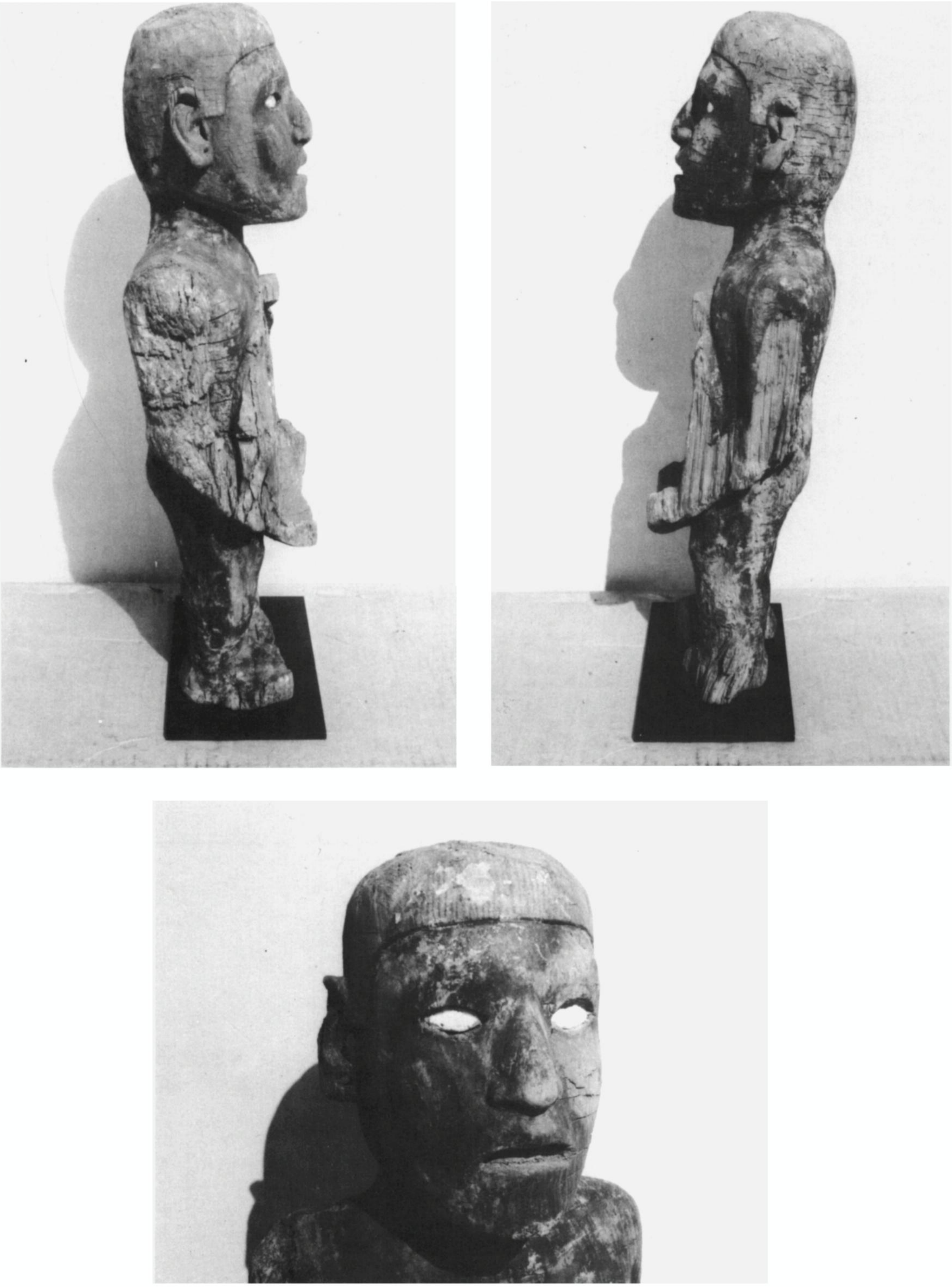


Fig. 13 Wood idol of male deity (rain god?): a) right side, b) left side, c) close-up of head. Courtesy Jay C. Leff Collection.

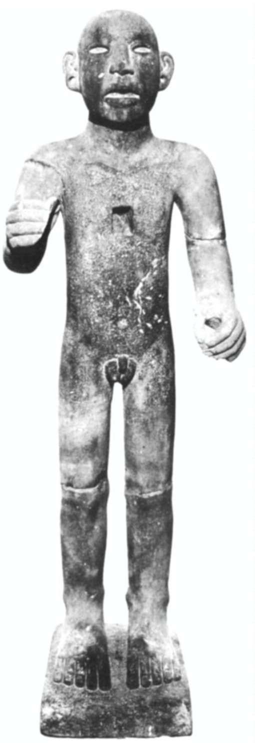


Fig. 14 Stone idol of male deity. Courtesy Peabody Museum of Yale University.

the female figure, thin perforations are present at the armpits.[5] In general, the body of this male image is treated somewhat more realistically than that of the female figure; the head and face (Fig. 13c), however, are virtually identical to that of the latter. This figure is also considerably darkened and gives the appearance of being slightly charred in spots, a condition caused undoubtedly by the same environment to which the other figure was exposed.

Iconography

The question of what deity was intended to be represented by this figure is a difficult one. A large number of "stripped" male figures of stone, usually but not always wearing the knotted loincloth, *maxtlatl,* are extant from Central Mexico and from some other areas subject to its strong cultural influence in the late Pre-Hispanic times (especially the Gulf Coast). They all, or nearly all, undoubtedly functioned as idols, but, lacking any iconographic devices, the deities they represented naturally cannot be determined. In our opinion, their function might have been more or less equivalent to that of the "store dummy" in our own culture, a mere foundation, as it were, for the addition of ornaments and deity insignia. It is even possible, as one of us has previously suggested (Nicholson n.d. a), that, as in the case of our store dummies, these insignia and ornaments were periodically changed, depending on the ritual occasion, so that they could represent different deities at different times. This is only a suggestion, however, and we are not aware of any supporting documentation for such a practice in any primary source. It cannot really be ascertained, then, which deity this figure represented since the deity insignia which are necessary to make this kind of identification have all been lost from it. The only conceivable clue, admittedly a very tenuous one, might be provided by the possible pair aspect of the two figures, which will be discussed below.

Chronologic Aspect

The male figure of wood similar to that of the female was dated by radiocarbon assay in an analogous manner. After correcting the measurement for fractionation effects (—24.35‰. with respect to PDB standard), often observed in wood, the radiocarbon age is 605 ± 60 years (UCLA-1251; Berger and Libby 1968b). Refining the date further by consideration of the secular variations in radiocarbon content of tree rings, the ultimate result is also sometime in the fourteenth century (Fig. 11). The discrepancy of thirty years in the estimated ages of the two figures is the statistical variation that can be expected between UCLA dating equipment counts dealing with this time span.

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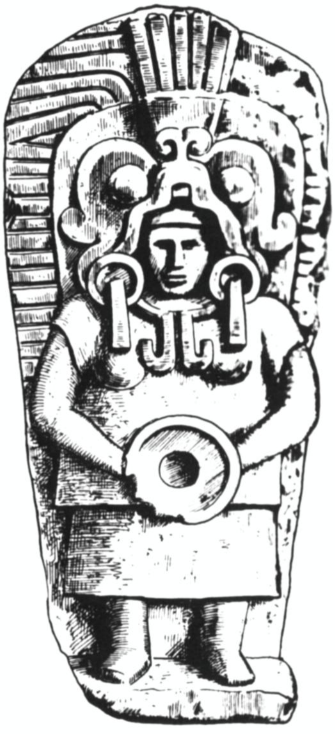
[5] Possibly through these holes was threaded a thin cord of maguey fiber, on which could have been hung or attached the rectangular rubber-spattered papers, (*ama*) *tetehuitl* and (*ama*) *quemitl* ("delantales"), so important in the ritual surrounding the sacred images (see Seler 1902-23, I: 225-6).

The Problem of the Function of the Rimmed Disks

A special word is in order concerning the possible function of the rimmed disks held by both figures. These are unusual, but we are aware of at least six stone images from Central Mexico which are somewhat similarly represented. One of these is a female now in the Palacio de Cortés, Cuernavaca (Fig. 15), which in the last century was preserved at the hacienda of Miacatlan, Morelos, near the ruins of Xochicalco—and was reputed to have come from there. Seler (1902-23, II: 158) somewhat obliquely suggested that it might represent Chalchiuhtlicue (cf. Nicholson 1961, Fig. 12). The circular device held over the midsection by this figure is quite similar in basic configuration to those of our two figures. In addition, the inner circular depression is similar to that in the sunken portion of the disk held by the male figure, although in this case it is centered. Another figure (Fig. 16), holding on its chest a large, sunken disk, without rim, was photographed by Soustelle in 1934 on Cerro Colhua, near Ixtacamaxtitlan, Puebla (successor of Pre-Hispanic Iztacamaxtitlan). It wears a large headdress, possibly serpentiform, and what seems to be a skirt; its identification as a female fertility goddess seems likely (in preference to Soustelle's Tezcatlipoca).

A third figure (Fig. 17) was found preserved at the hacienda of Tlahuililpa, Hidalgo, at the end of the last century. Its sex is indeterminate; however, the presence of what is



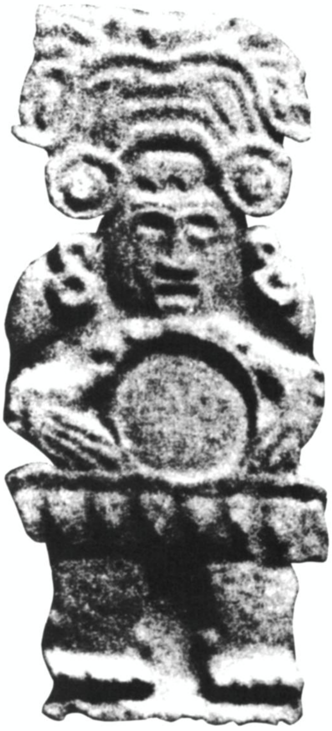


Fig. 15 (left) Stone image of female deity (water goddess?); reportedly from Xochicalco. Palacio de Cortés, Cuernavaca. After Seler.

Fig. 16 (right) Stone figure from Cerro Colhua, near Ixtacamaxtitlan, Puebla. After Soustelle.

probably a loincloth suggests that it is male. Again, a fairly sizable disk is held in the hands slightly above the midsection. Interestingly, a version of the interlaced A-O "year symbol" forms part of the headdress. This symbol, as is well known (see Seler, 1902-23, III: 423-4, 436; García Payón 1939), commonly appears in this position on the headpieces of the rain and fertility deities in various areas from Classic times on. It seems likely, then, that this blocky, stylized figure represents a fertility deity, related to both the Miacatlan figure and our wood idol of the water goddess. This figure might have been brought to the Tlahuililpa hacienda from Tula; in any case, it is almost certainly of Toltec date.

The other three figures are male. One, from near Tlaxcala (Fig. 18) and now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, wears a highly stylized serpent headdress and holds over its midsection a small disk which contains a deep rectangular slot. In this latter feature, of course, it is similar to the disk held by the female member of our pair, although its relative size is much greater. The second male figure (Fig. 19), with an even more elaborate stylized serpent headdress, was reportedly found in the community of Ixtacamaxtitlan itself, which is next door to Tlaxcala: it holds a larger, shallower disk, approximating in relative size those of our figures. Finally, a smaller figure in the Rivera collection (Fig. 20), of unknown provenience and wearing a large headdress which incorporates what may be a version of the A-O "year symbol," holds over its abdomen a small disk with a carved design in its interior instead of a depression. The presence again of the "year symbol" is interesting and probably identifies this figure also as a fertility deity.

Another representation is also relevant (Fig. 21). This is a figure, apparently male, holding a small disk over his midsection, carved in relief on a small jade plaque found in

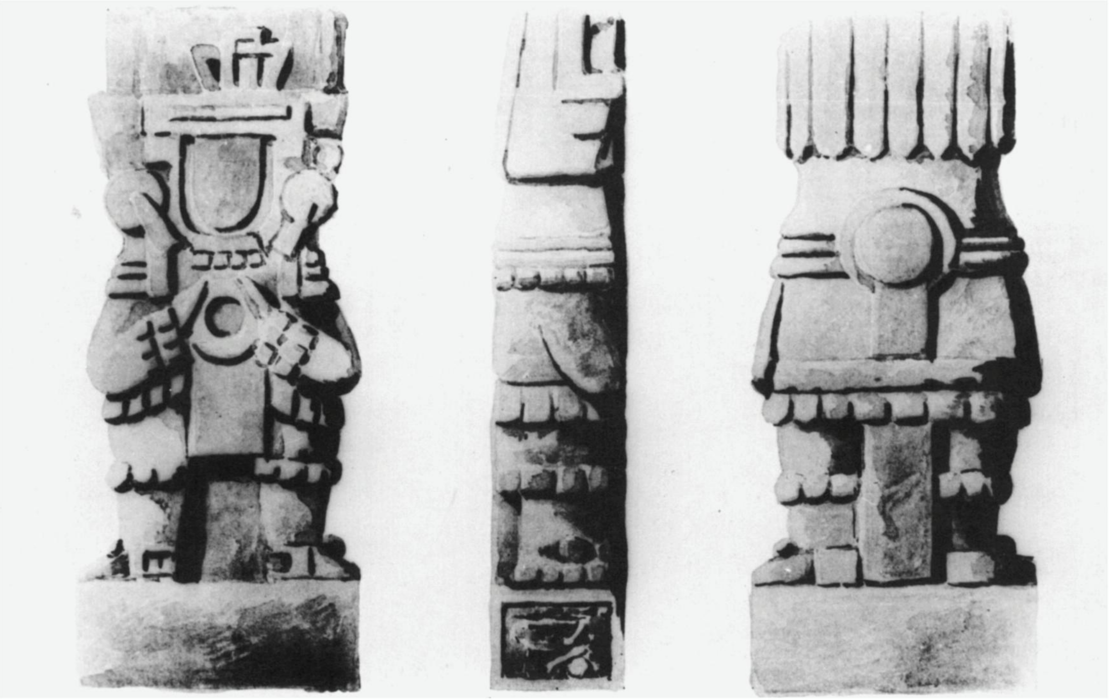
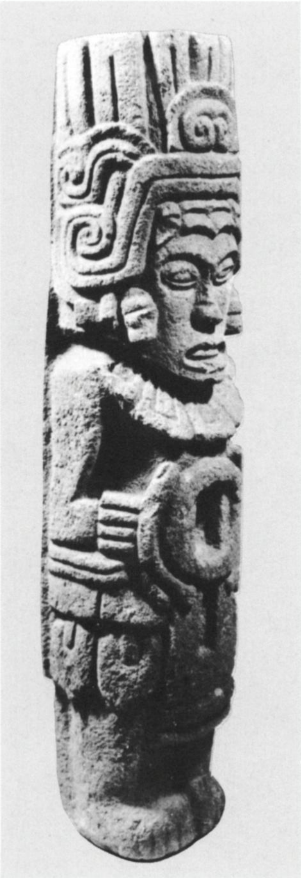


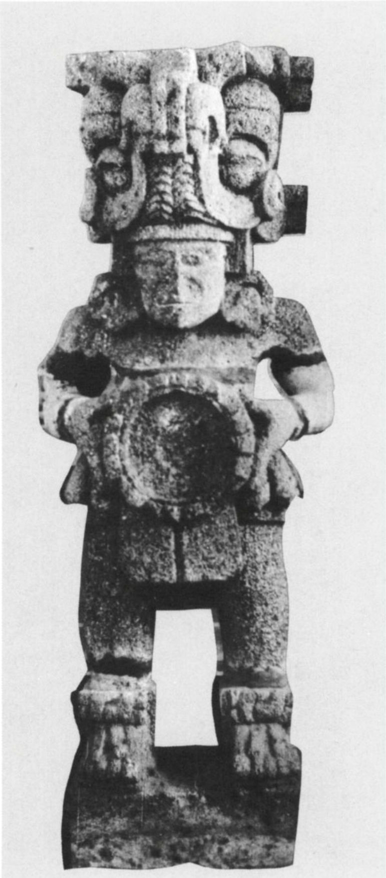
Fig. 17 Stone figure from the hacienda of Tlahuililpa, Hidalgo. After Peñafiel.

his Tula excavations by Acosta (1956-7:99; Fig. 25). The headdress in this case somewhat resembles that on Soustelle's Cerro Colhua figure, although its prominent volutes are lacking on the Puebla piece.

The disks held by all of these figures suggest to some extent those held over their abdomens by the well-known "Chac Mool" figures of Toltec and post-Toltec times. However, these are oriented horizontally and, in the case of those from Tula and Michoacan, are rectangular rather than circular. They also never display sunken, receptacle-like interiors. Therefore, they were probably functionally distinct from those with which we are concerned.

Whether the disks held by the six stone figures and that on the plaque—all of which are stylistically quite different from our two wood idols—were functionally equivalent to those held by the latter is difficult to determine. The fact that two of them display prominently in their headdresses a symbol intimately associated with fertility-rain deities would at least point in this direction. Almost certainly the disks held by our two wood figures





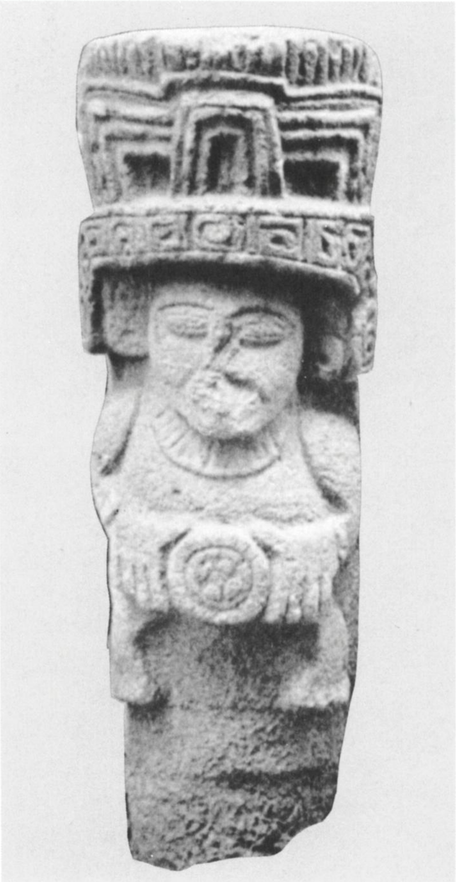
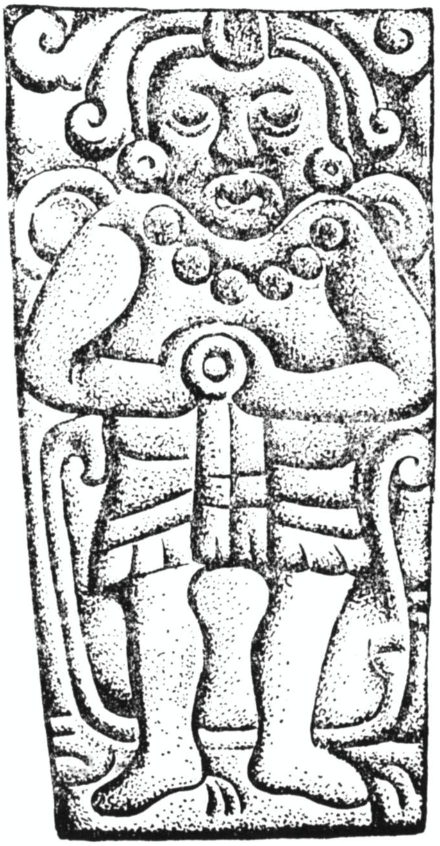


Fig. 18 (left) Stone image; reportedly found near Tlaxcala. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Archivo Fotográfico del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

Fig. 19 (center) Stone figure; from Ixtacamaxtitlan, Puebla.

Fig. 20 (right) Stone figure; provenience unknown. Diego Rivera Collection. After Médioni and Pinto.

Fig. 21 Jade plaque from Tula, Hidalgo. After Acosta.



were inlaid with something, and, judging from their appearances, this may also have been true of those held by at least five of the six stone images. One possibility is that they might have contained mirrors of pyrites or obsidian (Fig. 22). Obsidian mirrors were frequently employed for divination in Mesoamerica.[6] The supernatural personality of the chief deity of the late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican pantheon, Tezcatlipoca, was probably intimately related to this divining technique. One of the most typical insignia of this god (and others) is the large white ring, *anahuatl,* wrapped with and depending from a wide red leather strap. In the *Codex Borgia,* at least, what is obviously a mirror, probably of obsidian, usually occupies the center of the *anahuatl* (Fig. 23) and would thus correspond in general position to the disks held by our wood figures. Although in the pictorials from the Basin of Mexico and surrounding territory the *anahuatl* is shown as hollow, according to Sahagún's Tlatelolco informants (Sahagún 1950-63, Bk. 1: 2) it was also known as *eltezcatl,* "breast mirror."[7] Alvarado Tezozomoc (1944: 300) describes "un espejo relumbrante" on "la frente" of the Huitzilopochtli (in one context, an aspect of Tezcatlipoca) idol set up in the shrine of

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[6] One of the authors (HBN) is presently preparing a study on Mesoamerican divinatory mirrors.

[7] Durán (1951, II: 99) speaks of a "chapa redonda de oro" in the center of a feather fan held by the idol of Tezcatlipoca which served as a mirror (called *ytlachiayan,* "his viewer") in which he could see all that was occurring in the world. This, however, seems to be another version of the *tlachialoni,* a distinctive round shield-like object on the end of a staff with a perforated center (somewhat resembling an English dartboard) through which Tezcatlipoca peered at the world; it was obviously something quite distinct from a mirror-pectoral.

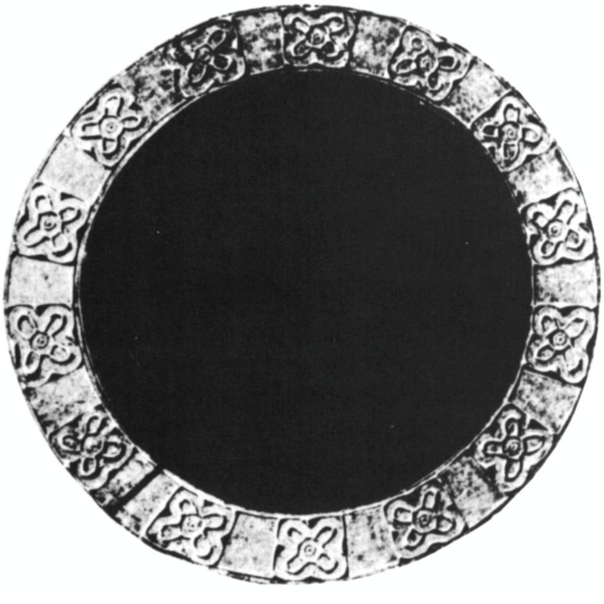

Fig. 22 Circular obsidian mirror in carved gilded wood frame. The American Museum of Natural History. After Saville.

the Tenochtitlan Templo Mayor in 1487. Some stone idols are also extant (e.g., the well-known Coatlicue image from Cozcatlan, Puebla [Seler 1902-23, II; 789]) which have small pyrites mirrors inset in their chests.

All these data would appear to support to some extent a mirror inlay hypothesis to explain the function of the large disks held by our two figures. However, a leading alternative hypothesis would be that they contained precious stone mosaics. This art was intensively developed in late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico, as we know from both considerable

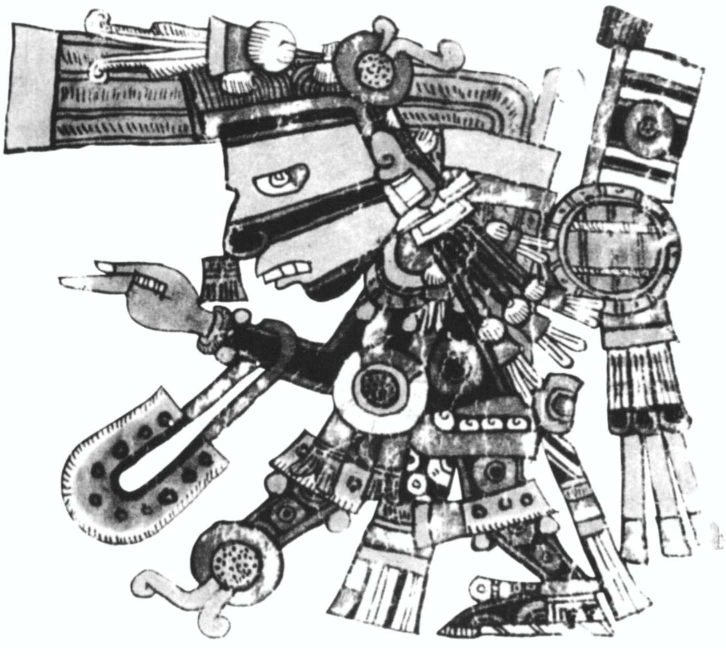

Fig. 23 Tezcatlipoca wearing circular white shell pectoral (anahuatl) *with obsidian (?) mirror in center (cf. mirrors on head and replacing foot).* Codex Borgia *21.*

documentary evidence and many surviving specimens.[8] Various shields and disks with intricate mosaics are known (Saville 1922: 68-79). It is certainly possible that mosaic plaques (Fig. 24) were originally set into the sunken interiors of the disks held by our idols, although no traces of such mosaics remain. It is a little difficult to understand why mirrors should be held by fertility deities, although they conceivably could have figured in weather or crop-fate divination. On the other hand, any appropriate motif(s) or symbol(s) could have been represented by a design in mosaic. One possibility is various stylizations of a water lily, *atlacuezonan*, which is pictured on the shields carried by the rain-water-fertility deities, Tlaloc (Fig. 25), Chalchiuhtlicue (Fig. 26), Yauhqueme, Tomiauhtecuhtli, Nappatecuhtli, and Huixtocihuatl in the Sahagúntine deity list in his *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagún 1905-7, VI: 23-35), compiled in Tepepolco, a major northern dependency of Tetzcoco. Of the two most likely alternatives, therefore, we should tend to prefer slightly the mosaic inlay over the mirror inlay.[9] It will probably not be possible to determine definitely what was inlaid in these rimmed disks until—or unless—similar figures are discovered in the future.

As for the oblong slot in the female figure and the circular cavity in the male, the most likely explanation would seem to be that they correspond to the holes originally containing inserts of jade, obsidian, etc., which are so often found in the torsos of late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican stone idols (e.g., Figs. 5, 14). These stones served these images as "hearts" (Motolinia 1903: 244), i.e., to vivify them. Sometimes these chest holes are quite large, and both the oblong slot and circular forms are common. In the case of our figures, these inlays would have been inserted first, then covered over by whatever was inlaid in the rimmed disks.

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[8] The most comprehensive survey is found in Saville 1922.

[9] The back of the Vienna "Xolotl" consists of a cup-shaped depression filled with resin. Nowotny (1949; 1960: 67) has suggested that it originally contained either an inlay of a representation of the solar disk or, more likely, a pyrites mirror.

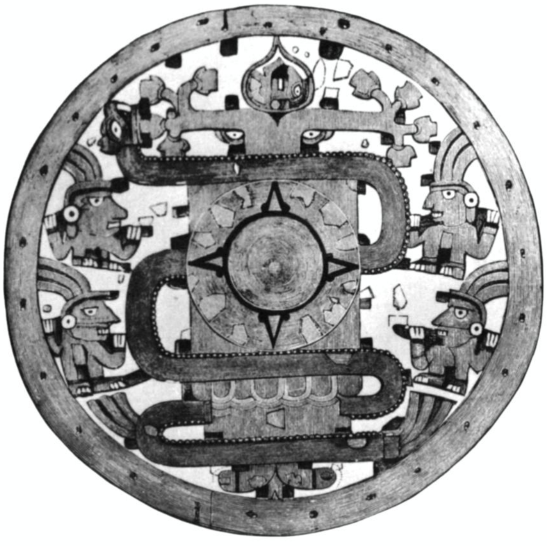
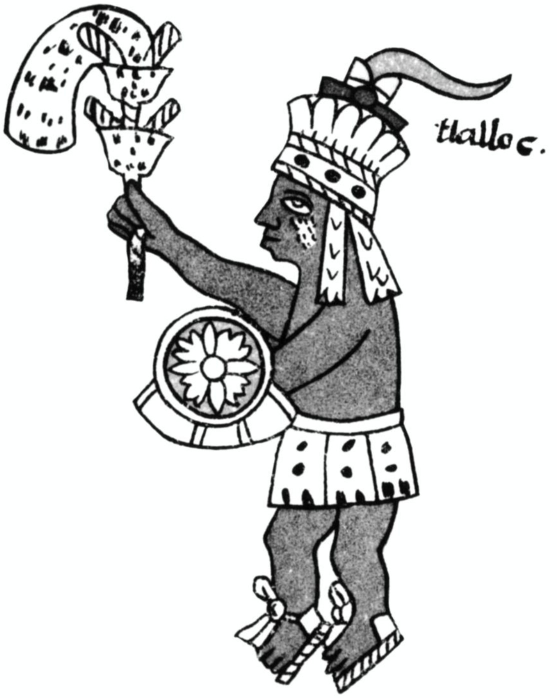


Fig. 24 Mosaic in circular frame (shield center piece?). The British Museum. After Read.



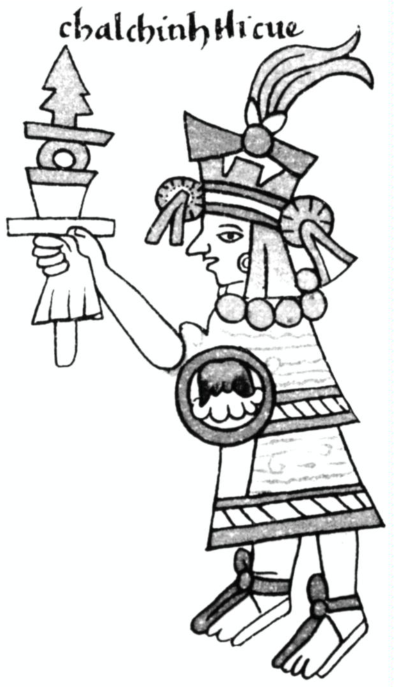


Fig. 25 (left) Tlaloc. Sahagún, Primeros Memoriales (Códice Matritense del Real Palacio, *fol. 261v*).
Fig. 26 (right) Chalchiuhtlicue. Sahagún, Primeros Memoriales (Códice Matritense del Real Palacio, *fol. 263v*).

The Male-Female Pair

These two wood idols were reportedly found together, and they are so similar, even to the discoloration they have suffered, that this can easily be accepted. Also, stylistically they are so close that it is not at all unlikely they were carved at about the same time by the same artisan. The radiocarbon dates support this view. Few clear Aztec male-female idol pairs are extant, but a famous case is the pair of Cozcatlan (southern Puebla) stone idols of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Seler 1902-23, II: 789), which represent Coatlicue and a male deity, possibly a fire god, whose calendric name was 4 Cipactli. Idol pairs might well be expected from late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico, because paired shrines on the tops of staged substructures were typical of this period (the best known examples, the Templos Mayores of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco and Tetzcoco [the latter was a conscious copy of the former], however, involved two *male* deities, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc). It might be expected that the male half of a male-female pair which included the water goddess would be Tlaloc, her consort (these two deities are shown sitting side by side in the same shrine on a mountain on *Codex Borbonicus* 35). Although our male figure lacks the striking diagnostic features of Tlaloc (eye rings, lip volutes, tusks, etc.), this deity (Fig. 25) and various of the Tlaloque (Opochtli, Nappatecuhtli, Yauhqueme, Tomiauhtecuhtli, *et al.*) were occasionally depicted with normal physiognomy. It is possible, therefore, that the male member of our pair was intended to represent one of the rain gods—but any such hypothesis would have to be advanced with great caution.

As for the question of how and why these two idols reached the spot where they were reportedly discovered, near the old lake shore, they might well have been tossed into the water, from the bank or from a canoe, during some ritual exercise or to prevent the Spaniards from destroying them. The former possibility seems more likely. It is known that the lake figured in various rituals, most notably at the famous "sumidero" or "ojo de agua" or "remolino" east of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, called Pantitlan, where a kind of enclosure of thick posts had been erected in the water and where great amounts of offerings were thrown into the lake to propitiate the rain and water deities (Sahagún 1950-63, Bk. 2: 84; Durán 1951, II: 142-3; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1944: 384-5, 425).

However, perhaps the likeliest explanation is found in a passage in the Nahuatl text (*Códice Matritense del Real Palacio*, fol. 186v) of the Sahagúntine description of the great New Fire Ceremony, *toxiuhmolpilia*, "Binding of the Years," at the expiration of one fifty-two-year cycle and the commencement of another (Sahagún 1905-7, VII: 274; Schultze Jena 1950: 72-3; cf. Sahagún 1950-63, Bk. 7: 25):

> *yoan in ixquich pieloya techachan, yn neteotiloya tequacuilti, yn aço quavitl, anoço tetl taxintli, muchi atlan onmotepeuaya*
>
> and all the idols adored as gods and kept in persons' houses, fashioned either of wood or stone, were cast into the water.

In other words, the old idols were discarded at this time of "world renewal," along with —as we know from this and other sources—used household utensils. Our pair of idols, then, might be preserved for us today through a conscious act of ritual "destruction" hundreds of years ago.

Remarks on the Radiocarbon Dates

The radiocarbon dates, in our judgment, are generally congruent with what is known concerning the development of sculptural styles in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico. Exactly when the final style, usually termed "Aztec," crystallized is still quite uncertain, but it was probably at least as early as the period of the Tepanec Empire of Azcapotzalco (ca. 1360-1428) and it may well have been earlier, during the "Toltec twilight" dominated by Colhuacan (ca. 1250-1360?; Nicholson n.d. a). The earliest securely dated Aztec style pieces (Nicholson 1955a) fall sometime in the mid-fifteenth century; by then the style was already quite mature, which presupposes a considerable period of earlier development. If the dates on these two idols can be accepted literally, it offers further confirmation of the view that the "Aztec" style had fully crystallized well before the "Aztecs proper"—the Mexica of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco—had achieved even political independence much less imperial importance, and it points up the inadvisability of the practice, adopted by some, of labeling Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico's final sculptural style "Mexica." Various other Aztec style wood objects are extant, and it is hoped that these can also be radiocarbon-dated in the near future, following which perhaps a clearer understanding of the chronological aspect of the evolution of this great terminal Central Mexican style can be achieved.

Summary

Two small wood idols, reportedly from the Texcoco area of the eastern Basin of Mexico and now in separate private collections in the United States, have been described, their iconographic features analyzed, and the results of radiocarbon-dating tests of them discussed. One, the best preserved, almost certainly represents the water goddess, most commonly known in Nahuatl as Chalchiuhtlicue. The other represents a nude male figure whose specific deity affiliation cannot be determined because of lack of diagnostic insignia, although it might have represented a rain deity. Both figures are holding large disks with wide rims, and they are compared with six stone images and one jade plaque from various Central Mexican sites similarly represented. Although the function of these disks is uncertain, it is possible they originally contained precious stone mosaics or mirrors. Calibrated radiocarbon dating of the figures, both fourteenth century, is consistent with their styles and with what is known concerning the periodization of sculptural traditions in late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico.

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